

High Stakes Testing and College Applications – Like I Have Time for THAT.

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When I help families with the college search process, parents often remark that getting into college is a lot harder than it used to be. Indeed, they are struck by how much busier teens are today than when they were in high school. A daily reminder of this reality is how often students come to see me with textbooks or a tablet in one hand and a Starbucks in the other. Can you say *Venti*? A recent study (“The American Freshman: National Norms for 2010”) underscored these issues by reporting that a growing number of college freshmen said they were “frequently overwhelmed” in high school (<http://in.princetonreview.com/in/2011/02/keep-calm-and-carry-on-stress-your-high-school-years-and-college-admissions.html>).

As the number of college applications soars, high school students and their families often feel like they’ve picked up a full-time job. When did prepping for SATs/ACTs and applying for college become so intense and time-consuming? This article provides some suggestions for managing the anxiety that is common during this important transition period.

Suggestions for Students

If you are worried that your SAT or ACT scores aren’t high enough, remember that universities use many factors during the admissions process (<http://www.nacacnet.org/studentinfo/articles/Pages/Factors-in-the-Admission-Decision.aspx>). Your grades are typically the most important criterion. But colleges are impressed by students who have really checked them out via repeated emails or phone calls or requests for information. Campus visits are opportunities for you and college personnel to get to know each other. Consider making more than one visit to your top choices. You may be the type of student whose strengths are easier to observe in conversation than via your transcript or SAT scores. It’s smart to stay in touch with your admissions advisor or other professionals you have met at colleges of interest.

Speaking of SAT/ACT scores, you probably know that a growing number of colleges are de-emphasizing this admissions factor. You have many options for college – although it is easy to think that just one is the “perfect” match for you. Depending on your test-taking skills, you may be a stronger candidate at one of the more than 700 4-year institutions that use factors other than these scores when admitting students (<http://www.fairtest.org/university/optional>).

If you have not yet applied to college, don’t conclude that your postsecondary options are over. Stop and ask yourself, “Am I ready to start college in the fall?” There is no magic formula that says a high school graduate *has* to start college immediately. The British even have a tradition called the Gap Year (<http://www.gapyear.com/>) in which students take time to work, travel, and develop more independent living skills before going off to university. If you haven’t applied

to colleges yet, it may be that organizing this process is very difficult for you. But it may also mean that, in your heart, you know you're simply not ready yet. Here are two options to consider if you remain unsure about starting a four-year college next fall:

1) Sign up for a summer "Taste of College" experience in 2013. These pre-college summer programs are usually 1-3 weeks long, take place on college campuses, and give students a clear preview of the academic and social realities of postsecondary education. For many students, these programs help them increase their knowledge about the college choices that will be right for them. Learn more at <http://www.heath.gwu.edu/publications/summer-pre-college-programs/>.

2) The majority of students with LD and ADHD begin college at 2-year schools and then transfer to 4-year institutions. This has been true for over 20 years. Community colleges such as Ivy Tech offer an excellent education at bargain prices. Their articulation agreement with 4-year colleges makes the transfer process easy (http://www.ivytech.edu/shared/shared_dcompwg/transfer/IU_Course_Transfer_List.pdf). If you can live at home while attending Ivy Tech, you can save even more money as you begin your college career.

The teen years are, by definition, a time of high drama and anxiety. Listen to your self-talk, which is the voice we all have inside our head. Is yours trying to freak you out by saying things like, "I'll be such a loser if I don't get into University X?" Take a deep breath. Anxiety has a way of ratcheting itself up and up. Put some of those worries in perspective by learning how to use positive self-talk. Statements such as, "It's just as likely that this will turn out well as badly" and "I do have other options if College X turns me down" can help you manage stress and problem solve more effectively. Learn more at <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/positive-thinking/SR00009>. More broadly, visit this website to develop additional ways to manage your stress (http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/stress_center.html#cat20861).

Suggestions for Parents

Research on what makes adults happy and successful often identifies self-determination as a key factor in this positive life outcome. This is especially true of students with disabilities (<http://www.pacer.org/tatra/resources/self.asp>). Self-determination is synonymous with autonomy, or our ability to identify and achieve our own goals. As parents, you can foster your teen's self-determination with humor, co-learning (in which you are equal partners with your son or daughter), and demonstrating how you go about reaching your own goals – while letting your teen continue learning how to achieve his/hers. Applying to college is such an important and prolonged process that it's easy to want to control every aspect of it. If you do, however, you can rob your teen of an important opportunity to learn lifelong skills while still under your roof.

Consider reading a recent book by Dr. Patricia Quinn and Dr. Theresa Laurie Maitland, called *Ready for Take-Off: Preparing Your Teen with ADHD or LD for College* (Magination Press, 2011).

This paperback equips parents with “coaching” techniques they can use to help their teens take greater control over important goals while also helping their sons or daughters develop more autonomy in their lives. The following article, from the NYU Child Study Center, offers parents other tips for helping their teens cope with stress:

http://www.education.com/reference/article/Ref_College_Process/

As your son or daughter receives admissions decisions from various colleges, expect a range of emotions. Listen to your teen if the news is disappointing; he or she just needs to vent and know someone else has understood. When the time is right (a day or two later?), you can help your teen think about other options or next steps. The following article provides very helpful tips for this type of conversation: <http://www.greatschools.org/college-prep/applying/647-handling-college-admission-decisions.gs>.

Finally, college counselor Marcia Rubenstein publishes an e-newsletter called EDUFAX (<http://www.edufax.com>). This resource provides helpful information about SATs, ACTs, scholarships and the college admissions process, particularly for students with LD or ADHD. Consider subscribing to EDUFAX or other online resources that can help you and your teen manage what has truly become a more complicated transition than we experienced “back in the day.”